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SUBJECT: THE CG IN SOUTHERN SAUDI ARABIA, PART 1 - THE
OFFICIAL GOVERNOR OF NEJRAN

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana Gfoeller, for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is Part I in a two-part series on meetings between the
Consul General and the Governor of the Nejran province.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. On a visit to the Nejran region, Consul
General, Congenoff and A/RSO met with the provincial
Governor, Prince Mishael bin Saud bin Abdulaziz, for a
private formal meeting in his office on March 27.
Interestingly, no other representatives from the Governor's
office, including security detail, attended the meeting. In
the company of the three official Americans, the Governor
spoke candidly about a number of topics including
modernization and reform, education, border security, and
religious tolerance. Throughout the 2 hours-long meeting the
Governor reiterated two main points: 1) the Saudi-American
relationship is very important to him; and 2) the betterment
of Nejran and its people is his top priority, as well as
discussing the uncontrolled Saudi-Yemeni border and the
Ismaili sect in Nejran. END SUMMARY.

CONCERN FOR MODERNITY

¶2. (C) On March 27 the Consul General, Congenoff and A/RSO
met with the Governor of Nejran, Prince Mishael bin Saud bin
Abdulaziz, for a private formal meeting in his office.
Situated in the southwest of Saudi Arabia along the Yemeni
border, the Nejran province is one of the least developed in
the Kingdom. Yemen's cultural influence is stronger in
Nejran than anywhere else in the country, owing in large part
to strong cross-border tribal affiliations. The provincial
capital is one of the fastest growing cities in the Kingdom,
and the region is one of the country's most fertile.

¶3. (C) After exchanging pleasantries, the meeting began when
the Governor dismissed his staff and began speaking about his
concern for the fast pace of Saudi modernization and how such
rapid changes will affect his constituency. "Change must
come gradually," he said. "You cannot drive a Ferrari at 200
miles per hour and then suddenly change course." Prince
Mishael implied that Nejranis will not adjust well to rapid
change because they are a very traditional, historically
tribal people. With modernization comes the potential for
them to develop even more conservative attitudes as a
backlash against rapid social and commercial progress. "They
(Nejranis) get more and more information from television and
the internet," said the Governor, "they have more access all

the time to many sources of information. It is easy for them to believe the wrong thing".

EDUCATION IS KEY

¶4. (C) The Governor is a huge proponent of education and spoke with pride about the people of Nejran and the educational opportunities afforded them. He explained that investing in his people and their education is the key to long-term development. He told the CG that Nejran boasts four technical colleges, two of which are for girls. When asked whether or not he had plans to open a university in Nejran, the Governor said that the small population did not yet warrant one. Congenoff asked Prince Mishael what he thought about the Ministry of Higher Education's scholarship program which has sent a number of Nejrani students to the US to pursue higher degrees. As a former student in the US, the Governor expressed his support for the program, but added, "We must keep them on the right path. You can have a PhD and not be intelligent...even an intellectual man can go down the wrong path".

¶5. (C) COMMENT. With this and similar statements, the Governor seemed to imply that, while education is important, it is not an end-all solution to the region's problems related to growth and development. In other words, higher degrees do not guarantee that young Nejrani will grow up to be moderate, forward thinking adults. This relates to his earlier comments about fast-paced change and his concern about how Nejrani will adapt to a more open, modern society.

END COMMENT.

¶6. (C) The Governor then harkened back to his days as an

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aviation student in rural Alabama and said that it was hard for him to fit in there. He quipped, "I wasn't accepted by the whites. I wasn't accepted by the blacks. So I went with the Mexicans." He expressed concern that Nejrani students will have similar problems integrating into university life and assimilating to American culture.

BOLD INITIATIVES FOR NEJRAN

¶7. (C) The Governor discussed several new initiatives for Nejran, all aimed to invest in what he terms the region's most valuable resource - his people. Most notably, the Governor announced the approval of a SR400 million project to pump water from underground sources in the Empty Quarter and pipe it to Nejran. This project will help alleviate the chronic shortage of water in the region. It is estimated that 50,000 gallons of water can be pumped per day for at least 40 years. The Governor claims that he conceptualized the project, but that he first had to go to the Minister of Agriculture to ask permission to conduct exploratory drilling in the Empty Quarter. Once the water was found, he had to seek approval from the Ministry of Interior to move forward with implementation. In a similar endeavor, the Governor recently approved an underground dam project to trap water in the Nejran Valley.

¶8. (C) Prince Mishael has also just inaugurated the first-ever agricultural exhibition in Nejran. The purpose is to introduce Nejrani farmers to new farming technologies and educate them about new techniques. It is a hands-on fair through which farmers can gain experience with new machinery and equipment. On a similar note, the Governor agreed to support a week of American commerce and cultural activities in conjunction with AmConGen Jeddah's Public Diplomacy and FCS sections. COMMENT. These recent initiatives are the most aggressive in Prince Mishael's tenure as Governor. There is the clear sense that he wants to leave behind a legacy with these big-ticket ventures. END COMMENT.

THE UNCONTROLLED BORDER

¶9. (C) Later in the meeting the CG broached the Saudi-Yemeni border issue, particularly with respect to weapons, alcohol, and drug trafficking and prostitution. The Governor's first reaction was to exclaim, "I don't mind them smuggling alcohol, though I could never say that in public, of course!"

He then went on to compare the Saudi-Yemeni border to the US-Mexico border, admitting that both are very long, porous, and difficult to control. The added complication, he explained, is that Yemenis are his Arab brothers. "One day a man who is coming to sell his fruits and vegetables will show up in a truck on the border with one identity card and the next day he shows up with completely different papers. If we stop him we're told, 'Be good to your Arab brother.' It is a very difficult situation."

¶10. (C) The Governor lamented the fact that he has no authority to deal directly with the Yemeni government on border issues and, instead, must go through the Ministry of Interior. Prince Mishael agreed that the biggest problem was the trafficking of weapons, citing that almost all guns and artillery confiscated by Saudi border police are brand new and clearly not manufactured in Yemen. He implied that the Yemeni government knows about and even facilitates such trafficking. When the CG asked the Governor if he thought the US could or should help the SAG deal with this issue, he said that the Saudis must do it for themselves. He did add, however, that the USG could help put political pressure on the Yemeni government to step-up efforts to prevent new weapons from entering Yemen from third-country sources.

COMMENT. The Governor clearly understands the limits of his official authority and alluded to the fact that bribery is an acceptable means to inciting action in his Governorate. "Sometimes the only way to deal with things is under the table." This is in contrast to an earlier statement he made about the importance of honesty and how his Governorate is "not the Mafia." END COMMENT.

I,LL GIVE YOU HIS GPS AND YOU CAN KILL HIM FOR ME

¶11. (C) The CG then asked about the Yemeni jail break of

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February 2006 to which the Governor replied, "Yes, but I will tell you about something much worse!" He went on to tell the story of a man who was murdered in broad daylight in front of his family in Nejran. After a lengthy trial (he claims six years) the courts convicted his assailant, but he had already escaped from a Nejrani jail and was living in Yemen. "I have my own information center, here in my Governorate," he said, "I have sources in and out of Saudi Arabia. I have people who know exactly what camp he is hiding-in in Yemen. I can give you the GPS of where he is right now and you can take one of your missiles and kill him for me. That's how you can help."

¶12. (C) COMMENT. This line of discussion was consistent with others throughout the meeting. The Governor is markedly frustrated by the constraints on his authority and the SAG's inability to expeditiously deal with significant problems.
END COMMENT.

THE ISMAILI FACTOR

¶13. (C) The Governor explained to the CG the role that the Ismaili religious sect plays in Nejrani society. According to Prince Mishael, Ismailis make up to 90% of the population living in Nejran city, but only constitute 40% of the population in the entire Nejran province. While they are typically classified as Shi'ia, the Governor said that their religious practices make them unique enough that the Aga Khan's Shi'ia do not recognize them as Shi'ia. For example, the Governor described how Ismailis remove their underwear, gutra and iqal before praying in their architecturally distinct mosques. According to Prince Mishael, Ismailis are also much more conservative when it comes to the treatment and protection of women, preferring

for them to remain at home and away from the general public at all times. While the Governor has sought to learn more about such practices from his Ismaili staff members, he claims that theirs is a "secret religion" and that, as a general rule, they don't like to talk about it. When asked directly by the CG how he feels about the Ismaili, Prince Mishael replied, "I don't care what your religion is. If you're a good man, you're a good man. If you're a bad man, you're a bad man, even if you are my brother."

¶14. (C) Prince Mishael added that, like all religious groups, there are some extremist Ismailis with whom the SAG has been waging battle. "Just like extreme Sunna, they are willing to die for their religion." When the CG asked what the Ismailis want from the SAG, the Governor initially said "nothing." He later added, "They are a minority in this country so, of course, they are not happy. This is the psychology of minorities; they always want more." While the Governor repeated several times that he is "open" and accepting of different religions and minority groups in his province, he spoke of the Ismailis and Shi'ia with a less than tolerant tone, interjecting such phrases as "those people." At one point he said of the Ismailis, "So long as they don't take their garbage (ideas) on the street, I have no problem with them." He lamented that most Ismailis have a stronger affinity towards their cross-border tribes in Yemen than to the Saudi state. Further, he opined that with the recent demarcation of the Saudi-Yemeni border, the Ismailis remaining in Saudi territory had a better deal than their poor ignorant cousins to the south.

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